

CITIES BEYOND

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Cities Beyond is a collection of poems about the liminal space between the suburbs and the pasture as metaphor for the created space of memory, self, and location.

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PART I
PREFACE

When I was younger we lived at the edge of the suburbs. On one side of us was the city and beyond it, Dallas. On the other side of us was a vast wooded area. I remember often imagining that we lived on the edge of civilization. My cousins and I would hike into the wooded pastures and search—for what, we never knew. I always felt as if I was on some narrow edge of the city and pasture. I would take long walks through the pastures at night and contemplate the stars. I liked the feeling of being one in among so many others who had looked at the stars, felt small, and returned to the warmth and comfort of their homes. I was reading a lot of Loren Eiseley then, and thinking about what he called the Night Country. In the book The Night Country he describes how the world has the power to change at night. In each of the essays collected in the book he discusses his and Man's constant battle with the dark. It is a world in which the imagination strikes out against the walls of reason and everything is made new—darker, stranger. The Night Country never disappears, however. You carry it with you into the daylight. It becomes a transformative place from which you come and from which you encounter the world. As Eiseley puts it:

In a way it is the fear of the tide, the night tide, I call it, because that is the way you come to feel it—invisible, imperceptible almost, unless it is looked for—and yet, as you grow older you realize that it is always there, swirling like vapor just beyond the edge of the lamp at evening and similarly out to the ends of the universe. Or at least it gives you that kind of sensation—a need to huddle in somewhere with a light. (32)

Of course, the Night Country isn't a place ruled by fear, it wasn't for Eiseley and it isn't for me. After learning about it, absorbing it, I did what Eiseley does in a later essay: accept the Night Country and peer firmly into the dark or peer out from it. What I realized at a young age is that this place that existed for him would become very much a source from where my own writing would spring forth. Where he stood at the edge of the woods and turned a keen eye inward, I stood at the edge of the suburb and the pasture.

Where I walked was the liminal space between where we had developed and where we had yet to go. Oh, I knew while looking into the pasture and woods that several miles beyond were more roads and more cities with their suburbs slowly crawling this way, but I imagined nonetheless that this wasn't so. It was allowing myself to imagine this space that prompted me to begin writing from it. It impacted so much of my early work, either directly in the case of poems like "The Bull" and "Guide to the Suburban Walker" or indirectly, as in poems like "The Canary and the Miner" and "Salt Spring Island."

In the last few years I've started to believe that there is something missing from some contemporary poetry—specifically poetry which is rooted in the memory of time and place. Some current poets have written many books of poems which deal with events and places in their past which end up seeming nothing but anecdotal. Though rooted in memory, they fail to be much more than pedestrian because their experiences are often very similar to the experiences of other poets and readers. If they are not anecdotal, the details of time and place are often too internalized to have meaning for the reader. At this point the poem becomes a series of inside references which cannot inform the reader. With the idea of the Night Country as my model I've begun to develop my sense of how poetry can be rooted in both memory and place—yet, not the actual, passive memory of the poet. Poems could be created out of an actively imagined place and actively imagined memory. A created space could become the wellspring from which poems could arise. Though there are many, many poems and poets that write convincing and moving poems based from their memory, there are just as many who do not. I wish to create poetry from this liminal space in my imagination—the border of what is real memory and what is created, what is real self and what is invented.

In my poems the speakers always remember their affinity for their created space. In the suburb of my mind there are rows of houses where my speakers live their individual lives. There is an edge of streetlamp and then nothing but pasture. If a speaker isn't looking into the pasture, he or she is interacting with other people, but always has the knowledge of the pasture, the Night Country. Creating an imaginative place from which to write or gain experience can completely alter the way a poet looks at setting in a poem. It can transform the way a speaker comes to terms with himself and his surroundings. My poems are as much from the suburbs surrounding Dallas as from the Night Country.

The Pasture and the Poet

The idea of the Night Country existed, I believe, for Robert Frost as well. In many of his poems he talks about a loneliness in which he thrives and sees the world through better eyes. Frost writes often from the pasture and the wood, but his speakers are never thousands of miles from civilization. The rural space in which they walk is always just beyond the lights of the nearest city or village. This creates much of the tension in his poetry. One sees this easily in a poem like "Aquainted with the Night." Frost talks about the long walk which takes him beyond "the furthest city light." After, there is a profound loneliness here:

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. (265)

It is the figure of this watchman that I find so fascinating in the poem. He is, by most accounts, inconsequential to the speaker. And yet, he is important. Though the speaker is

walking out in the streets, the watchman is the only person who should be out. And though the watchman is there, the speaker is still lonely, still searching. Frost continues:

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by; (265)

Lonely in a night world of other people, Frost is describing perfectly the modern poet. He remembers the guidance of the old Romantic poets yet yearns for a place more real, more concrete. He doesn't want Nature to save him. He is the voice of one who cries in the wilderness. He is Eiseley's wanderer in the Night Country.

I took my walks at evening as well and felt as a kindred soul to Frost. I couldn't help imagine he was speaking to me. Hubris, for sure. But what is the poet who doesn't think boldly of his own talents and potentials. The poem ends brilliantly:

And further still at an unearthly height
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night. (265)

Even the description of the moon speaks to an early fascination with the night—an affinity I shared prior to ever knowing what it meant to write. The night was a gothic preadolescent object to solidify my angst. Only years later did I realize how difficult it was to write an interesting and meaningful poem with the moon, or the night, or the dark of night, as a subject. Frost was one of a few poets who had solidified his authority well enough to do this. But how had he done so? It was with his image as a poet-farmer and the seemingly surface level of his good country poems. Frost cultivated this ideal of himself. He liked the image of the poet-farmer and used it to his advantage.

In his essay “On Grief and Reason,” Joseph Brodsky says of Frost that “He is generally considered a poet of the countryside, of rural settings—as a folksy, crusty, wisecracking, old gentleman farmer...”(6). But this, of course, isn’t a complete picture of Frost. In truth Frost had a much darker range. Place the image of farmer-poet against the speaker in a poem such as “Acquainted with the Night” and Frost’s depth becomes clear. By encountering nature, he was able to dig deeper into the heart of night. Brodsky goes on (with Frost as his model) to compare how American and European poets engage nature. Unlike a European, who views nature as a playground of allusion, he says, “when an American walks out of his house and encounters a tree it is a meeting of equals. Man and tree face each other in their respective primal power, free of references: neither has a past, and as to whose future is greater, it is a toss-up” (8). He goes on to say that “[nature] is this poet’s terrifying self-portrait” (8).

This idea of nature as self-portrait, or even anti-self-portrait is mirrored in the poem “Desert Places.” In this poem the speaker views Nature not as a self-portrait, but as another entity which should frighten the speaker, but ultimately does not. The speaker is looking at a field completely surrounded by woods and, once again, night is beginning to fall. This field becomes the liminal space between what is wild and untamed and what is pedestrian and commonplace:

Snow falling and night falling, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
.....
The woods around it have it—it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares. (296)

Here the speaker absent-mindedly stops at a field he had considered walking past. We are meant to understand the seeming randomness of the occasion for this poem. While at first we are

supposed to believe the speaker's lack of intimacy with the surroundings, we later come to realize he is comparing himself to this field surrounded by woods. What makes this first glimpse of the landscape so haunting is the idea of the animals and the field—both aspects of nature—being smothered by nature as well.

Frost continues:

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express. (296)

The speaker seems transfixed by the view of the woods, the field, the snow falling upon the field. He sees within himself the same sense of being trapped. The field, lonely as it is, is surrounded by the woods and being smothered by snow. For the speaker the field has as much hope of leaping from this lowly state as he does, and so his attention is caught fast. The speaker turns his attention to the stars to and finds them mirroring the field with what vast spaces exist between them, which in turn mirrors the loneliness he feels:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (296)

In the end there is either no salvation from loneliness, or the speaker is relieved to know that he is lonelier than the image before him. Frost embodies this field with an emotion felt only by people—loneliness. It is from this space that he has created that the speaker can look inward and be transformed by what he finds there.

The idea that Nature becomes the ultimate 'other' to the poet is also shown in Frost's "The Most of It." In this poem the speaker is wandering through the woods, completely alone,

and crying out in hopes that another person will hear. Not only does he feel alone, but when he yells he is mocked by the echo of his own voice:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own (338)

While the speaker is talking about an untamed wild expanse, the same can be said of the pasture. The poet walking in a secret world often finds himself or herself alone, even unto the universe, and I was no exception. Ironically, I was never truly far from the comfort, or lack thereof, of another person. The pastures I knew were a liminal space of solitude. In them, however, they held the mystery of the quiet world, the wild itself. The wanderer in the poem continues to cry out, hoping to meet another:

He would cry out on life, that what it wants
Is not its own love back in copy speech,
But counter-love, original response. (338)

Frost goes on to write that the wanderer gets no human response in the woods. That despite his desire for companionship, no suitable match arrives. However, the wanderer is greeted finally by something else:

Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
In the cliff's talus on the other side,
.....
Instead of proving human when it neared
And someone else additional to him,
As a great buck it powerfully appeared,
Pushing the crumpled water up ahead... (338)

“Powerfully” is the word Frost uses here—a risky venture. The grandeur of the moment is already captured in the fact that it is a “buck” and that it “appeared.” Also, it is a “great” buck and it pushes the water ahead of it. The power of the buck, and even the moment is already underscored throughout the lines. But Frost reiterates this idea of power by using the word for a

reason. It isn't simply the "power" of nature which Frost wishes to conjure. There is a spiritual power working intricately here. The wanderer, while searching, comes across not man, but beast—a *powerful* beast (in every sense of the word) and is changed by it. Nature becomes more than his equal, which can and will have a strong influence on anyone, specifically a poet. The poem ends:

And landed pouring like a waterfall,
And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
And forced the underbrush—and that was all. (338)

The poem ends unexpectedly. There is no grandiose meaning directly inferred through the closure. We simply accept this force of nature, embodied in a buck, as a response to our own searching for meaning. Sometimes the answer isn't given to you; the Night Country can be elusive, and so must be the meaning it doles out.

Re-imagining Community in the Night Country

While Frost skirted the darkling pastures and the edge of night, Mark Doty walks directly into the night. Doty inhabits the Night Country differently, however. While he understands the loneliness which inhabits these created spaces, the speakers of his poems wish to build a community within. Doty wishes to share the imagined space with others, in the hopes that they too can be transformed. From there he can forge new worlds and ideas and voices; similar to what Frost has done, but with less solitude. He writes tremendous, bold poems about loss—about one's place in a world of things, and about hope.

In his poem "Night Ferry," Doty begins to show us a transition between two shores—concrete reality—into a body of water at night. From there the speaker begins to imagine the

ferry as a great leveler. The passengers and he are all the same in their voyage across the black expanse of water. Soon the speaker begins to contemplate the idea of *place*. From the opening lines we are meant to journey with the speaker from one shore to the next:

We're launched into the darkness,
half a load of late passengers
gliding into the indefinite
black surface, a few lights vague

and shimmering on the island shore. (71)

There is an importance in the black indefiniteness and the movement into and through it. We are moving into the unfamiliar territory within a larger, familiar space. This new space is liminal and unexplored. Already we sense a moment of emptiness, and already a sense of hope with the lights “shimmering on the island shore.” There is no knowing who the “we” of the poem are. It is easy, therefore, to make an assumption for the universal. It is all of us on the boat, moving through this imagined space between shores. Therefore, The poem goes on:

The narrative

of the ferry begins and ends brilliantly,
and its text is this moving out
into what is soon before us
and behind: the night going forward,

sentence by sentence, as if on faith,
into whatever takes place. (71)

For me this is a small testament of a poet's ability to move us through the imagined space of a poem. It is as if we are coming to a physical reality created both by the idea of what is written and the physical characteristics of what is written here. In my own work I wish to begin building new worlds from which to write. I want to create these worlds almost the way that Utopian novels are created. Utopian poetry then would aspire to create, in a sense, a new world from which to recount memory, experience, metaphor, and language. The idea of space and its

creation are familiar to both Frost and Doty. However, this is where the two differ most; Frost sees a place and imagines the potential of his own mind's ability to conquer or be conquered; whereas Doty looks at a poem as an opportunity to create place in the narrative of the poem's meaning. Doty goes on:

It's strange how we say things *take place*
as if occurrence were a location—

the dark between two shores,
for instance, where for a little while
we're on no solid ground. (71)

Doty is imagining that poems which describe the experience of a location—a physical location—take place. The experience and telling of a place becomes as real as the place itself. Therefore one must ask, must a place being described actually and physically exist. And if such a place literally exists, whose to say which poet's telling of it will be more accurate. Everything becomes a figment of creation.

The poem ends:

Twelve dark minutes. Love,
we are between worlds, between
unfathomed water and I don't know how much

light-flecked black sky, the fogged circles
of island lamps. I am almost not afraid

.....
There's no beautiful binding
for this story, only the temporary,

liquid endpapers of the hurried water,
shot with random color. But in the gliding forward's
a scent so quick and startling
it might as well be blowing

of the stars. Now, just before we arrive,
the wind carries a signal and a comfort,
lovely, though not really meant for us:
woodsmoke risen from the chilly shore. (72-73)

The “woodsmoke” is what brings us hope of warmth and comfort. At the end of the trip across the water “we” will be comforted by a place much like home. This poem comes to us from his book My Alexandria. The title derives from the city of one of his favorite poets, Constantine Cavafy, whom he once referred to as the “patron saint of desire, memory, and longing.” Doty’s desire is to create an imagined space from which to speak.

Self as Landscape

Another poet keenly interested in allowing the imagination to create a place from which to speak is Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa wrote in Lisbon, Portugal where he found a lack of contemporaries and no real literary circles to speak of. So, as opposed to creating his own space he created his own circle of literary figures—nearly seventy-five, in fact. He called them *Heteronyms* and each of them had a distinct name and biography. What’s more amazing is that each had distinct writing styles and voices. Even an intermediate reader of Pessoa can distinguish between Alvaro de Campos, Ricardo Reis, and Alberto Caeiro.¹ In fact, there are hundreds of instances of magazine articles and reviews written by a heteronym about another heteronym. In this, Pessoa is seemingly removed altogether from any discussion taking place.

But he created more than just “characters” to write poems for him. Taking a cue from Wordsworth, Pessoa expanded on Wordsworth’s idea of a poem’s necessity to reflect a previous “emotion recollected in tranquility” (Monteiro 15). Pessoa felt, and thought Wordsworth felt that created emotion is just as good—or even better than emotion felt by the poet. It wasn’t a case of insincerity for a poet to create emotion because a poet should have a memory of feeling which he

¹ Three of Pessoa’s more well known *heteronyms*.

or she can conjure up at any time to fit the needs of a poem at hand. He says (as Alvaro de Campo) that “None of this has anything to do with sincerity. In the first place, nobody knows what he truly feels” (Monteiro 16). The ability for a poet to control his intellect and his emotion is paramount to the success he will have in writing from emotional perspectives. “[T]he superior poet says what he in effect feels... the middling poet says what he decides to feel. The inferior poet says what he thinks he should feel” (Monteiro 16). This was Pessoa’s Utopian dream: to create so many selves that he would always have fresh ideas and strange new worlds to explore.

Among the massive amounts of writing he left behind after his death was a trunk filled with nearly 600 pieces that were marked to be included in book called the Book of Disquiet. Disquiet is written in pieces; some short (two or three sentences) and some long (one or two thousand words and more), all written by Bernardo Soares.² In the book he writes little episodes from his life, observances, and highly imaginative stories. They are poetry in their own way. Untitled, they are given numbers by the editor. In #103 Pessoa, or Soares, writes: “I cultivate hatred of action like a greenhouse flower. I dissent from life and am proud of it” (99). In #154 he writes: “Who am I to myself? Just one of my sensations” (138). Pessoa was very much interested in the idea of self and how we define ourselves. It wasn’t a some kind of New Age fascination that Pessoa had, however—he wasn’t interested in creating a better self. Pessoa wished to know everything about the thing we perceive and call the self and then he wanted to create new and unique ones.

Pessoa wrote thousands of poems under the guise of his ‘heteronyms.’ The poems are varying in their aesthetic and style. He did this, of course, to present the “self” as any other

² Another Heteronym, this one however claims to have written under a couple dozen of his own *heteronyms*, a mind-boggling idea when one considers whether or not those *sub-heteronyms* had their own *heteronyms*.

literary device. Under the name Alvaro de Campos, Pessoa writes the poem “I’m beginning to know myself. I don’t exist,” and gives us perfectly this sense of identity as a created space:

I’m beginning to know myself. I don’t exist.
I’m the space between what I’d like to be and what others
made of me.
Or half that space, because there’s life there too... (116)

Here Pessoa is making the case for “otherness” as a virtue to be reckoned with in poetry. Not only a virtue, but a literary device. He would have us know that the idea of “self” is not necessarily tied with the self-actualized identity of self. Not only can a poem have a created speaker, but that speaker can be the product of a created self. It’s fascinating to think of the potential this creates in poetry and other realms of art.

A Case for Utopia

As contemporary poetry continues to explore and resist the kinds of poems which are written out of the memory of real experience of events and place, we will see more and more poets employing techniques which distant themselves from personal, anecdotal writing. In workshops and academies more and more poets are beginning to look at other ways of writing about experience and self without some of the self-serving aggrandizement that some of poets have used.

I make the case that to do this we should move away from the idea of creating personal poetry out of the memory of a speaker or of ourselves and begin exploring the notion that place, even created place, and created selfhood can be the occasion for confessional, lyrical, or any other kind of poetry to spring. In this sense *place* could become preeminent, and its creation will border the very same concepts that *place* i

n Utopian literature explores—not necessarily a perfection of place, but the creation of place. Poetry can continue to thrive, even confessional poetry, if we begin to distance ourselves from the reality of place and selfhood, and move into a newly created place—a strange and even darker world—the Night Country.

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PART II
POEMS

one.

Fog

Tonight a fog has risen from the valley.
I drive home unable to see what houses
crowd their narrow streets.

If there are lights they are mute
and still above the road.
I stop the car and stand outside,

close one eye and peer into the fog.
But I can't guess what world
I've slipped so easily into.

Have the suburbs been elevated
into the realm of clouds?
Have sleeping families raised,

through piety and prayer,
this heavy city, and to what end?
Perhaps I've fallen backward

into sleeping, and this is the world
of my dreaming, and this is how it appears
when I'm not busy dreaming here.

The subconscious, that tomb of memory,
needs me looking, both eyes open,
to be anything but foggy.

But maybe
the fog is weather of no import,
condensation rising into cooler air,

blanketing the streets with a weighty
lack of conviction,
moving very little, owning no metaphor.

That seems more plausible,
more lovely even,
the earth breathes softly,

unencumbered with poetry.
So next time I'll begin with:
A slow-moving cloud of condensation,

(*Fog*, cont'd – stanza break)

without metaphor,
lay heavy on the streets.
And then be done with it.

Five Seagulls

*Experience is an intact fruit,
core and flesh and rind of it; once cut open,
entered, it can't be the same, can it?
-from "Source" by Mark Doty*

Broad grey gulls against the morning sky
make a clumsy, white parade.
I hear their cry above the lot
of cars and empty spaces.
Unused to seagulls, I watch them lord
over a flock of small black birds.

And a simple moment passes.
Something new is born from easy stuff.
For me there will be seagulls again,
but never such as this.
Though that is the hope of memory:
to be reborn again into experience.

The seed will shed its former flesh,
will struggle to split open,
burst and unmake itself,
but at last become the tree again,
which soon will birth the fruit;
not the same—but similar.

The seagulls will return,
crossing fields of years past
to reiterate these little moments.
For now they fly over rooftops
and move into memory; strange country.
Each mind carries its geography.

You visit there with words or with nothing.

Women

for Amber

The stars drifted last night as if they were strangers
and cast their odd glance back at the watching world.

All night we lay in the yard beneath the humid moon,
our talk heavy from wine and words we rarely use.

And you became the perfect woman—a shabby futurist,
wanting only to be entered, entertained, and in the end, rejected.

Being just a man, I did these things. The lawn was dark enough,
the night shamefully warm, and to you the stars seemed romantic.

When you asked me to sing I tried to conjure up a tune
from some internal radio, but couldn't remember even one.

And you forget what songs I wrote for you,
back when you did not love me, back when your body was china

and not as it is now, a paper plate which can never be washed.
With your past dressing you, I'm no longer aroused.

My mother snared my father for his love of music.
In college she wrote songs and played them in beer joints

on borrowed guitars. I wonder now what music played
the nights they worked at making me. The point of a needle

scraped over the vinyl surface, moving inward to finality,
to the climax of the record's scratched conclusion.

In the morning I took you home. I woke you from your sleep
and hit the streets before twilight. And that's when a song

I should have sung came on the radio, and we both listened.
Quietly we drive into the morning.

Moon

Tonight you are a god's golden nipple;
an ornament pinned to the rafters of the sky,
and I embark on naming you again:

sent-off son of the earth,
flashlight of the thoughtless,
lighthouse of an infinite ocean.

Remember me? The child who at eight
could smudge you out of view by simply holding up
a young thumb to the air.

I could close an eye and poof! You'd disappear.
I'm older now and thinking how
you've guarded all those names:

Luna,
God's thumbnail,
the old boat of the beaten starry sea.

I wish I could own your shine.

Remember us? Susan used to say
your light was hers and mine.
Laying with my head in her lap,
drowsy on the evening lawn I'd watch
you rise over my knees: a bright bird
leaping from a tree's darkened limb.

An awful omen.

How was I to know you'd lose your magic.
The mystery revealed: a dull mirror of the sleeping sun.
Yours is a legacy of failure,
at best, futility.

Watching you tonight I realize how
she is gone and you remain,
and how I hate you for that.

Guide to the Suburban Walker

You have to make the power lines a new aesthetic;
and the concrete a path which you can take or not.
And every house must be beautiful,
for being something created—unlike the mountains
that just are and will always be.

You have to stop occasionally and stoop
to lift a lost treasure from the weeds:
a split golf ball, a festival cup, a cap
that someone lost while driving past
on a lovely day, with the top down.

You should always smile at the other walkers
with strollers or animals and know
that they have resigned themselves to be contained,
while you quietly pass through their neighborhood
and walk into the next.

Don't despair at the portrait that modernity lays out—
but breathe at every hill—breathe deep.
Be a master of the woods, the hills, the street,
the houses, the tennis courts, the pools, the stop signs.

Be content to simply be while walking in a world
that no one else has seen, yet lived in every day.

Camping

I think we both felt small beneath so many stars
and the darkened tree limbs hiding them, a night
without light. You said you'd forgotten names.

We were surrounded then by nameless trees
and stars, camping on a hilltop, above a lake,
in Spring. It rained all afternoon. That evening

you said the mud felt good between your toes,
the grass beneath your back. You undressed,
took off everything to get closer to the earth—

to nature whose names eluded you. In the morning
we finally saw the negligent beauty of the lake,
a sun rising overhead, so close we could climb to it.

Other little fires peaked their heads up around the lake.
We made love on the ground as if to give fire back to God
with a small thank you. Then we watched

the day that grew from us and found speech wanting.
It's years later, now. I'm older but no wiser.
For three days I've been pretending I'm nothing.

I have photographs of then. You look pale
and wide-eyed. It was a time without time,
which means everything. For my part I think

we felt small. We stopped talking as politely
as one shakes a hand. I heard you've moved,
matched your geography to your heart.
I don't make love anymore, I don't go camping either.

Cone Sphere Cube.

We touched the bottom of the valley
and watched what mountains lifted into
sheer cold sky.

We heard on the radio how another storm
had breached the western range
to make its way

into our horizon. And when the sun
was muffled by the clouds dark shadow
building upward

we found shelter in the snaking road
heading East to Denver
into clear night—

toward the flat stacked tenements
so much like a sea of doors where
we know no one.

This is our great hike into glory.
No road of heroes—we flee boredom
and drive to the party.

A thousand balconies lean out over the river
point westward, point to the growing storm.

Salt Spring Island

March, 2006

It was dawn when we first saw the harbor.
On a slow ferry with business types
and journeyers and drifters, even a judge
whose briefcase seemed larger than a car—
all of us drifted toward the island.

We stood at the bow and drank whiskey
from soda bottles and paper bags.
We laughed about the long drive from Texas;
how Canada was still a dream within
a dream. A lost and anxious continent.

We came from the bored shores of colleges
and jobs and loves. But on the island
it was different. We hitched to the northern coast
to drink in wood-floored bars and dance
with pale island girls who dreamt of leaving;

which was foreign to us who had just arrived.
In the morning, in the harbor store,
Paul made us sushi. We watched him pull
his knife through the shiny black seaweed skin,
through wet rice and blood-red salmon.

He told us how the other islands' natives
won't settle here; *they think*
the island has turned over.
Anyone can see it at the mountain's top,
the mollusk shells are everywhere.

We wanted to see how the world was formed
so we walked upward through fern and mud
into cloud. We laughed above the resonant
crack of our heels on mollusk shells.
And we too could see it—the tall pines

glistening from the morning rain
were once long and horny roots
scraping against the breastplate of the earth.
At the top we saw the other islands
rise like the bright green backs of whales.

(Salt Spring Island – stanza break)

Afterward we walked down to the bay
and drank beers above the beach.
The harbor waves reached up and caught
the clouded sunlight, just to die and return again,
as they always have. And none of us spoke.

I think we all wanted to be young again,
to grow spiritual or superstitious,
to be the native islanders scattered
among the waves at the edge of islands,
at the edge of a vast, forgetting continent.

Beneath us the whales let out
their narrow songs, searching in the dark.
How the earth must seem to them:
a vaulted cathedral ceiling.
Its people: how we crawled out of the sea

to build our own domed chapels
as if wanting to remember.
We scratched out little streets and roofs
to dwell beneath, and shed our native
skin and native tongue. At night

we had almost believed we'd see
the northern lights and we almost thought
ourselves disciples of the wheeling stars.
Now, as we stood at the edge of the island,
we imagined, if for only a moment, to tilt.

The River

Off the log roads, past
the hills of cut stone
and builders' wood, discarded
beneath the mountain's thorny eye—
the river,
uncorrupted, quickly flowed from Eden's mouth
and back into Eden.

And you, bewildered,
drawn down from the trail head,
drank with your hands and bathed,
your head dipped into the salmon stream.
Where your hand touched the bottom,
and your flesh incorporated with fossils,
a plume of riverbed dust
rose up and drifted away with the leaf-boats.

For a moment you plunged
into the water and were borne away.
You could see it, the deep
pulling all of you.
If you hadn't let the sun breach the cloud-topped trees
and climbed back to your waiting car,
they would have found you later—
your body at another river's mouth,
passed along like a word.

two.

A Hesitant Sweep Inward

I don't consider this monotonous
Pushing and pulling to be of any great
Consequence. The dust rises up and hangs
Heavy in air split by sun and shadows
When at dusk light bleeds from the windows.

This cold and splintered broom will rest a night
And wait to do it all over again
Tomorrow after the dust has settled
And the halls are quiet and the children
Have left once more. It is not a question

Of whether I enjoy this chore or not,
And if it is it is no matter for
The school board to consider. I am old;
The last unburied stone in this building
That sinks from a poor foundation. They ask

Me to fix the cracks in walls and ceilings,
But I am no man of brick and mortar.
I can easily cover cracks with paint
And fill out forms to gain some permanent
Remedy, but I doubt they will be read.

No one else hears the creaking sounds at night.
Nor have they watched the seasons change in words
On bathroom walls and in the notes the young
Often pass and leave carelessly behind.
Those are the products of such colored minds

And I collect and keep every one.
They are my loose-leaf crayon testaments.
Can you not hear them saying old age ends
Only by the mercy of youth or death?
There are days when I know not which to fear.

Soon I think the latter will surprise me.
Though I hold fear like I hold anything—
Gripped firm by hands that have known harder toil.
And when they were young touched the sweetest soil
And made flowers bloom in all directions.

(*A Hesitant Sweep Inward*, stanza break)

Yet there was Rose, who knew no thorn but me.
I found her in the gardens of my youth.
Now there are only weeds where snowflakes fall
Or move weightless upward like summer seeds
Trapped by a simple breeze just as I am.

My voice is quiet now; a soft ringing
Of keys hanging patiently at my hip.
They are my last two pieces of silver.
They guide me from the hall to darkened rooms
Where no one knows that I sit to listen

To the creaking in my bones and wonder
If someone is coming to patch me up.
And I wonder if the mold will conquer
This building or whether mountains of dust
Will rise above a deep sea of water

Flowing from a leaky bathroom faucet
And spilling out into every corner
That I once gripped firm and held in order,
Or will this old building find some new god
When I'm sleeping silently beneath her?

The Bull

Awake now, he sees her fumbling in the dark
for a second sock. She moves with little grace
before a window tightening with dawn.

And he thinks to speak, but thinks more.
He is moved to not move, just watch as she steps
into a dance of dressing and slips from his room.

In the dark he remembers being younger
and walking north away from streetlights,
into abandoned pastures, and how one night

he leapt a fence to walk the stretch of a stream.
He remembers the unbolted moon lit everything;
the fence, the stream, the curving field.

And how he heard a low grunt rising
near a tree downhill, the waxy leaves a thousand moons,
and how he saw the dark mass rise to ponder him.

He remembers kneeling into mud and quieting
his breath, sure the beast would charge
if his chest sang out its red pounding.

But now, years later, he knows the girl is different
and she would never charge.
She is content enough to leave before she hears
his heart beating in its own dark pasture.

Crosby Street

I take my sweet time with a dumb saunter
halfway down the hill to where the bars
frame high-stacked flats behind;

to where young girls
line the street, their pockets lined with cash,
and stalk the shimmering reflections

that race against bar windows and disappear
when lights change and traffic moves;
to where doors open to exude smoke

and close again, hiding me in a dusty wooden booth,
where I still go to pretend a life.
Sitting out the long afternoons,

drinking with the others,
I wonder at where my youngness went,
and my walking with those girls.

Was I ever as pretty?
Sometimes I wouldn't
stop where the rows on rows ended.

I would walk out past the buildings
that shine like dull headlights
to the rows of houses

where those cars would go,
where the lawns seemed always perfect,
and where men still loved their wives.

A Girl in Denver

It might be winter when you start
feeling stranded in your body,
You'll wake at dawn, to foreign music.
A morning walk becomes
a funereal parade, the round sky
a suffocating mouth.
For a season you'll feel desperate
over bowls of oatmeal, over coffee.
In the mirror you might ask what hell
this strange body has risen from.
and you swear you see your father,
though uglier than you remember.
For a time your wife will yell
that you have dragged in leaves
which once again lay scattered on the lawn
divorced from their limbs.

But then you'll come across
the photo of a girl, coated
like an Inuit, the mountains behind her.
In the photo she is laughing,
her breath a factory tower's plume
and you remembered the street, the snow,
how the city shook at dusk
and how you held the camera
with hands soft as she was soft.
Not as they are now; grown old
and hairy as a monkey's neck.
You know your wife doesn't know
those hands, that street,
the way you loved the mountains,
doesn't know you. But you will smile
and remember
that once there was a girl in Denver.

The Exile at Work

Stacked plates lean beside her,
and tower above a wide steel sink.
In time each one will dip

below the water and be cleaned.
She washes dishes for the restaurant
and cleans them one by one,

unlike other washers—who are quick
to send the multitude through the machine.
Instead, she singly meditates

the grease away and wonders
at each bit of meat uneaten.
How each crumb is just

a story about hope.
And there are faces in her work,
the eyes of her parents

in the bubbles which, despite her efforts,
disappear into dirty soap water.
She is content with her new home,

this new country of her sentiment.
The little rooms her children live in,
the New York buildings—

tall as little Babels, the first home
of exile. She has watched them lift
at dusk into a disappearing sky,

seen the multitudes of birds about them
flit fickle wings and change directions,
moving always in unison.

She's wondered at their moving;
how they are a plume of smoke,
breeze-trapped, an orgy of flight.

They too must be emigrants who drift
across borders and squawk and babble
at their reflections in the windows.

(The Exile at Work – stanza break)

Their movement creates itself.
Without some overarching guide
the flock moves, so like humans

who wrestle at night with ghosts,
each in our own bed moving together—
a giant sleeping swarm.

All exiled to life, we're told
as we lie dying that we're going home.
She wonders as she washes where that is,
having known so many, many homes.

Victoria

Two fish
leap or plummet in her tattoo,
each chasing the other's fin below her breast.

Ad infinitum—
I keep thinking as I watch
her awkward dancing in the half-dark room.

A clumsy drunk,
she has her beauty hidden well.
She mouths the words to a song she doesn't know.

Blue-black hair
is a her disguise, a night of sorts,
or it is a mask which hides nothing;

because black—
it announces her despair
or boredom, or her hope for a change. All Autumn

she has slept
beneath the weighted, snowful clouds
in a world unwhitened by their not letting go.

Across all
the campus lawns the leaves begin
to congregate more faithfully and thicken

her mood.
She wants to leave again and soon,
but doesn't have a place to fix her longing to.

The world is wide and empty.

Thomas Walks Below

He's grown tired of the buildings at dusk,
how the light's long fade leaves a sky in every window
and orange steps from puddle to puddle.

He knows the moment when the sun is mocked
by lamps sputtering into fullness, lining dusty streets
grown dark and echoing the squeal of cars.

He seeks the station below,
where trains rush by and blur petalled faces
racing into the belly of the city.

Far from the surface where the city blooms,
through stone corridors go the wanderers
he wants to be—the ragged unencumbered.

Above, the moon wears a sequined dress of stars.
From every window on every street
light explodes like awakening.

The Canary and the Miner

Through split rock,
earth pulled slowly into air,
she descends into the dark
chasm absent of light,
a tenant of the miner's cage.

Yellow as light on thin brass wires
from the flicker of the candle strings
reaching into the dark's extremity,
her wings flutter as she waits
the fatal breath, her only song.

And the echoes never vary here;
the squeal of wheeled carts
negotiating the endless tracks,
water falling from an unseen roof,
the hushed call from another tunnel's mouth.

At night when they're exhumed,
he hangs the cage above the porch.
To let her watch what shadows move
in trees she dreams of owning.

She watches what shadows spark
the flame which wakes the morning,
where he coughs up a life's work of dust,
and both descend once more to depths
that neither fail to fathom.

Cuba

for Reinaldo Arenas

At night a giant bird
 made light of your slumber.
 She pranced from limb to gnarled limb
 in the wild coffee trees until,
at dawn
she dove into your chest and planted
 her beak half in.

And from your chest her pretty wings rose like orchids from a gutter.

When you woke
the pendant hung from you—bird wings bent back,
 lifting from you, too strange to hide,
 the beak hidden in your chest.

And you, not dancing, would remember
 the songs of revolution.
But no one sings of the revolution now.

And all day long you'd wear the bird pendant,
 yellow as the burning sand, beautiful.
This is what it was to love her. And this;

the ocean, always the ocean,
 at night the moon on black cane,

the prisons where your brothers sang
 their requiems for crusts,
 fields of blood, dust and blood.

And the ocean,
 always the ocean;

lover, noose.

To a Friend Who Failed at Suicide

He always tuned each string
to its precise end, a moment
of fixed and faultless pitch where
he could feel the tug of wire

on wood come to its conclusion.
And knowing taut's importance
he let each little movement of the wrist,
each drawing in of breath,

bring order to the strings discordant yearning.
Then he let the deep and wooden throat
of the guitar open; let it speak for him.
He loved how he could let the notes

reach a point they could not return from,
how breath will not blow back but rise,
wine within the guts of a glass
will turn, but still be wine.

I still see him hunched over his guitar,
an ear to the oiled wood, trying to hear
the song which dreams of its making,
the song inside of everything.

Though we are momentary, perhaps he'd stir
the water for *his* moment,
and send the ripples kindly out.
Looking back, the years widening,

he failed to see the beauty of imperfection,
how the torn petal doesn't fail the flower.
And drawing pictures in his childhood room,
the way that need moved through his fingers,

he spilled out a country of what creatures stirred
within the visions of his dreaming;
the horse with legs too short to run,
the flower bent on smiling,

the house whose roof had no shingles.
Despite their impossibility,
he should have remembered

(*To a Friend*... - no stanza break)

that in the night the horse still carried him
off through fields of smiling flowers and the house
always sheltered his return.

three.

Plum

after Charles Wright

Inside the house in one small room
a young boy deliberates A trembling fat god
remaking the world He sees a plum
lying shriveled at the window saw once a snake
beside a columbarium swallowing a mouse
In the yard now he sees a girl
negotiate the reaching limbs of a tree
The boy creates an end for everything

He remembers he has been there beside the street
beneath the shadow of a phone line
Saw one white cross stabbing into earth
small and crooked forged from the hands of grief
He recalls the sirens lifting into dawn
and knows it could have been him
He heard how another boy stepped off the sidewalk
and leapt into the mouth of death

Coffee Mugs

Now I drink coffee from a mug
stolen from my mother. She lives
a few states away in a small house
with new mugs. She isn't dead yet.

Her mother, who *is*, is painting
in the dark, in a basement that is dark.
She paints white horses running—horses
which do not exist, will never exist,
the way that she did, or does, or won't.

I am looking out a window—
it is day or it is night, or it is that moment
when you're not sure of the difference.
I spoon raw sugar into the mug
that I will break or will be broken
or will one day soften into dust.

Then my uncle drives past the window,
he drives backward to the liquor store.
Now he is sleeping after dinner.
Now he is in a hospital room, confused,
while a blood clot travels through him.
It loves the quickness of his heart
and the cadence it will halt.

I rinse out the mug with water
that will never find the ground.
It flows through miles of pipes
and ends up somewhere else.
Then it flows through someone else
or someone else's mug.

Eventually I'll kill them all:
brother, father, mother, a girl
in fourth grade who had dimpled cheeks,
my priest, a lawyer, an old man I once met
who talked patiently to nobody and to nothing.
Soon no one will exist,
just like those that never did,
just like those that never will.

The Goldfish and the Painter

I won't mourn the insignificance of your floundering,
your last few gasps, once translucent skin turned orange,
your too-soft belly turning up, floating in the wake.
The only tragedy in your death—that I was helpless.
My mother called and told me who had cancer.
So I wrapped you in cellophane and orange peels
and buried you. I can start my own traditions.
The marbles that lined your tank couldn't stop you
from drifting out of April. Fear left you floating, though;
a hundred cats' eyes staring up!

Somewhere she is breathing with the help of a machine.
And her paintings wait unfinished in a basement.
I always saw her painting by the sea, her hand
dragging a brush across the canvas. Now she sees
the lighthouse beacon spin a thousand times tonight
from a window, in a hospital, by the ocean.
And far below the cliffs she may have painted
the fish drift in and out of darkness.
They call you back to depths below the waves,
to peer with them at the distant shoreline.

Swimming Pool

An empty swimming pool, collected leaves
settling down in the drain, a small puddle
of rust-colored water. That, too, was ours
before we moved to the newly cut edge
of another town, in some other state;
a little yard of brown and homely grass.
Standing in the shallow end, I listened
to the trees wave us off, the wind rounding
the plaster walls, echoing. This was home.
At least it was for me—swimming often
at dawn, when the world slept cool in its skin.
That day, before we left, I stood beneath
the surface, with bare feet on the plaster,
and floated in the memory of water.

Dust

I don't care much for funerals.
Irony gets lost on the gathered flowers.
Women sob into the hair of their kids.
The kids twist their heads and wonder
what's all this commotion?

It's only dust that lines the pockets of the dead—
where keys were once, and clinking change.
It doesn't matter now, the keyhole's rusted,
the keys have fallen into floorboards,
the roof, I can see it, sags.

But we living try to pocket the dead
as soon as they stop breathing.
It's a wonder we can move at all
under the weight.

We drag them to the movies
or prop them up in our beds.
Let them sit and watch the shadows barely move,
we want them greeting us at dawn.

Remembering the dead won't help.
They gave what they gave
and left us without want.
They are like the flowers
which crown their grave;
let to wilt, be rain-ripped, or blow away.

The dead should be forgotten.

Wake

Let light conquer everything
Surface to where dreaming leaves you
breaking through a wave

or you are the wave receding
No amount of sleep
will change what power waking has

Those first few moments desireless
reborn and leaning
against the body's limitation

The suit which you have worn
for work or weddings your Sunday best
will be the shroud you're buried in

Imagine how blue your lips will be
and the still breath of family
who waits for you to arrive